

Dec. 15, 2019
White As Snow
Isaiah 1:18-20
SOLAS:Vespers
St. John's College

WELCOME

An impossible age ago, impossibly far away, an impossibly distant journey was impossibly being planned. It was prepared with the help of impossible helpers, impossibly comprehensive lists were being checked and double checked: the impossibly naughty were being written down in one impossibly long column, and the impossibly nice, along with the details of their impossibly perfect gift, in the other.

And the impossible news: that an impossibly mysterious man impossibly conveyed would impossibly arrive to bring impossible goodwill and impossible cheer to the whole impossible world, was greeted, as usual, as a beautiful impossibility.

Welcome to an evening that should not exist. Christmas is the cultural repository of our unlikeliest hopes and dreams, dreams embodied by its two main heroes. As you were listening to my opening gambit a moment ago, some of you were thinking of one of them, and some the other one.

One of them is somehow more appealing to us than the other.

Perhaps it's because although he says nothing more than "HO HO HO", he appeals to the better angels of our nature: he holds the promise of what we would like to think we could be if only we were a little "nicer," a little less "naughty". If we were a little more helpful, a little more generous, a little more patient, a little more kind, perhaps over time we could get better and better. We all like this idea very much, this karmic sense that whatever we put out into the universe will come back to us. And since we are absolutely convinced of the human potential for good, especially our own, we look

forward to the day that we will finally get what's coming to us.

Jesus on the other hand makes many of us profoundly uncomfortable. For starters, unlike his Christmas counterpart, he apparently has a *lot* to say. And he is kind of rude about it—he positively demands to be listened to. Worse still, most of the things we are told that he said, if we bother to pay attention to them, actually make us feel sort of bad about ourselves. He confronts us with the fact that when it comes right down to it, we all deserve something a whole lot worse than a lump of coal in our stockings.

But what's most shocking of all, is that Jesus first insists *not* that we get better and better but that we acknowledge that we are utterly *incapable* of doing so. As long as we are committed to the idea that without him *we can*, we will never understand the Good News of Jesus Christ. Paradoxically, if we abandon the human project and subject ourselves to this impossibly frail, seemingly impotent Potentate, he will take our misdeeds and give us something better than justice: he endured the punishment that *our* sin deserved to unite us by his Spirit to his perfectly sinless self in order to *transform* us by *his* power. To use the

image that Isaiah coined: “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (1:18).

But such abandon, such surrender, such transformation, only comes through pain. And pain seems to be the last thing we are willing to contemplate, especially at Christmas time. Ironically, Christmas is inherently—by design—*full* of pain: from the inevitable humiliation and isolation that an unmarried girl and her faithful, albeit seemingly cuckolded betrothed, experienced, to the exhaustion and discomfort of a long journey at full term, to the excruciating labour and delivery itself,

to the imposition of a crowd of burly strangers peeking in to the birthing stall; and that's not even counting the pain of the events surrounding Jesus' birth, Herod and his cold blooded murder of countless innocent baby boys being the most poignant and tragic example.

So, tonight is a celebration of Christmas as it always was and always will be, not the gauzy candy cane pipe dream of Old Saint Nick, but the uncomfortable truth of Jesus Christ: the thrilling impossibility of unendurable pain dissolved by inexplicable hope—sin as scarlet white as snow.

If you find tonight's service meaningful, I'd ask that you consider donating to help support SOLAS:Vespers. While everyone donates their time and talents to this project, it still costs between \$400-500 in facility fees and printing costs to produce each service, and we are currently down about \$800. There is an envelope in your programme for this purpose which can be dropped off in the box as you leave.

PRAY

HOMILY CAROL: White As Snow

Read: Isaiah 1:18-20

I was all ready to prepare a sermon on the text I just read, but apparently God had other ideas. Sitting in an orchestra rehearsal last week I was struck with the strange idea that I should write a carol for tonight's service, a carol based on the text that I was planning to preach this evening.

If you've been with us this fall, you will know that we have been working through the first chapter of the book of Isaiah. You will have heard Isaiah's warning: that rebellion against God inevitably brings delusion and

desolation. And you will have heard me speak about today's passage before, since every hopeful phrase in it directly addresses the dire consequences of rebellion which the rest of the chapter outlines in such dark shades.

My thought had been to now throw this small patch of brilliance into sharp relief with a short and hopeful Christmas homily. I had even started writing it.

But then comes this strange idea. A carol? I've never written a carol before. And in the past whenever I've tried my hand at writing any kind of

song the results have been pretty forgettable.

But as I was sitting in that WSO rehearsal, a tune began to precipitate in my mind, and by the time I got home the tune had fully crystallized, a tune that, in its mixture of major and minor, mingles the pain and hope of Christmas which I referred to earlier. An hour or two at the piano and I had worked out the harmony.

The stable made ready, I waited for the chickens to come home to roost. And come they did: seven verses scrabbling in quick succession, with one straggler hammering on the gate very early the next morning.

Since I've been singing the carol obsessively to myself all week, I have made a few refinements, but it is largely the same carol which overwhelmed me a week ago.

I've been so looking forward to hearing someone else sing it! So now I'm going to stop talking and let Michelle and Allan teach it to you. You can find it on the last page of your programme. We put it there so that if you want to you can easily remove it from the folder and take it with you. It will also be posted on the website solasvepers.org. This carol came so quickly and unexpectedly to me, I see

it as a gift from God. I was simply the one to wrap it and pass it along.

SING

You may have noticed that these verses form a little Christmas sermon of their own that expound on the passage I was going to preach on! And the refrain juxtaposes the kernel of the Gospel lifted straight from Isaiah—"sin as scarlet white as snow"—with the most profound expression of the purpose of Creation that a chorus either of angels or humans can utter: "Gloria in excelsis Deo!/Glory to God in the highest!"

The rest of the statement sung by the angel chorus, "and on earth peace, good will toward men" though not quoted are worked through in the verses. They span all of history. They look back to the Fall of humanity, to our estrangement with God. They address the eternal present: the challenge which we all face at every moment, either to accept or to reject the reconciliation made possible by the birth, death, and resurrection of our Saviour. And they look forward to our ultimate hope of glory: that we will rise with Christ, transformed, immortal. As C.S Lewis put it: **"the promise of glory is the promise, almost**

incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses [...] shall please God. To please God...to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness...to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is.” (*The Weight of Glory*, p13)

To be honest, I am still grappling with the text myself, but one thing I have noticed—and maybe you noticed it too—is that almost every line can be understood in at least two ways. Take

the first verse for example: is it the *people* who are “long forsaken” by *God*, or is it *God’s crying* that has been long forsaken by the *people*? It is both, of course. In the second verse, the “daughter frail left to labour” is obviously Mary, but since she is described as “Zion’s daughter”, all of *God’s people* are in view: the Bride of Christ enfolds the eternal One who washes her white as snow. Likewise, in the third verse, while *God’s chosen people*, the descendants of Abraham, have largely scorned the invitation to feed at the humble trough of their Lord—their “master’s crib,” as Isaiah put it—*all* of *God’s chosen people*

from every race and tongue have scorned their Lord, and it is only by his irresistible grace that he continues to draw us to himself: “I’ll *make* them white as snow”. The word “tender” in verse four is not only an adjective but also a noun. That is, the “tenders” of sheep are “tenderized” by the shock troops of the angelic host; also, not only their sins but they themselves are “carried by the Lamb of God”. And so it goes: *from* the very ends of the earth wisdom risks all, “ventures”, to seek its Source, but by the same token the Source of all wisdom ventures *to* the ends of the earth to gather his people to himself. The “rude place” is both

the manger and the cross (which was known as the “rood” in Old English); the Saviour has “borne”, or carried, a “remnant” but he has also birthed one; the “appointed sepulchre” is both the tomb and the womb; and our prayer is not simply to “unite us” to each other, but to the “crimson Son” who, by his shed blood, through his Spirit, makes us one with him and with one another. I could go on, but I’m sure you get the idea.

It occurred to me that there is an ancient tradition of poetic homilies that goes back through Isaiah, through David, through Moses, all the way to the account of the Creation and Fall.

So, in the end I decided that this carol would itself serve as the sermon for tonight's service!

Knowing all this, how about we stand once again and raise our voices and preach to ourselves this homily carol!

BENEDICTION

PRAY

Thank you once again for coming to sing with us tonight, to contemplate and celebrate the glorious impossibility made possible by Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection.

My Christmas challenge to you is to meet the challenge of God spoken through Isaiah: "Come let us reason

together...though your sins are like scarlet they shall be as white as snow, though they are red like crimson they shall become like wool. If you are willing..."